RECENT WORK

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AGENTS, ACTIONS AND REASONS

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I

The idea that there is a branch of philosophy called 'the philosophy of action' can be dated roughly to the second half of the twentieth century. But while the label is new, the subject matter is not. At least since Socrates, philosophers have concerned themselves with the themes and problems now gathered under that label. In essence, the philosophy of action seeks to offer an account of the behaviour that characterises humans as 'rational animals', to use Aristotle's phrase; behaviour that provides the grounds for judgements about people's goals, characters and values, and on account of which they are held to be causally, and sometimes morally, responsible for certain outcomes and situations.

Anscombe's book *Intention*, which was strongly influenced by Aristotle's and Wittgenstein's views, is rightly regarded by many as the most important direct contribution to the philosophy of action in the twentieth century.[1] *Intention* set the agenda for subsequent work in the area by replacing questions about free will and the voluntary, which had occupied philosophers for centuries, with questions about intention and the intentional; in particular, with the question: "What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not?" (*Intention*, §5). Anscombe's answer was that "they are actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (*ibid.*) Given this answer, the question about intentional actions, though not identical to, became synonymous with the question: 'What distinguishes actions done for a reason from those that are not?'.[2] In the process of clarifying both question and answer, Anscombe touched upon, or explored in some detail, most of the central issues in the theory of action; issues which might be gathered under three main headings: the nature of actions, the nature of reasons, and the relation between the two.

In the years following the publication of *Intention*, and especially after the publication in 1963 of Davidson's paper 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', the theory of action concentrated mainly on

1. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Blackwell, 1957).
2. Indeed, philosophers in contemporary debates often talk indiscriminately of reasons and intentions as the causes of actions, though Anscombe would have objected to both.

questions corresponding to the first and the third headings.[3] One such was the question of what an action is, together with related problems concerning the individuation and spatio-temporal location of actions. Another central question concerned the character of the relation between reasons and actions in reason explanations of action. Let me say something about each.

In her examination of intentional actions, Anscombe drew our attention to the fact that agents, whether intentionally or not, often do one thing in, or by, doing another; for instance, I may replenish the water supply of a house by pumping, which I may do by moving my arm up and down. Because of this, it became clear that, before the question of the intentionality of action can be tackled, we need to examine other issues. Among them, there is the question of whether, in these cases, we are dealing with one action (perhaps amenable to various descriptions) or with many. If the latter, we may wonder how these actions are related: as part and whole? As cause and effect? In some other way? In any case, there is the question of how we can locate this action or actions: where and when does each of those 'actions' begin and where and when does it finish? Is any of these actions (or descriptions) more basic than the others? If so, in what sense? And what does this basic action consist in? And so on.

By the mid 1980s, the prevailing doctrine concerning the nature of actions was that an action is an event (a bodily movement), caused by mental events or states (a reason or set of reasons), and itself the cause of events 'in the world' (the action's effects) on account of which new descriptions can be applied to the original (basic) action. This official doctrine, which was roughly Davidson's, was accepted by most philosophers, even when they disagreed with some details of the picture. What was not generally disputed, however, was the view that actions are events that are both caused and causally explained by the agent's reasons.[4] Accordingly, the view went, what makes a particular bodily movement an action is that it is caused by a reason (perhaps via an intention) that rationalises the action when considered under the right description—the description 'under which' the action is intentional. This brings us to the second topic: reason explanations of action.

II

In *Intention*, Anscombe maintained, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, that, in general, we ought to distinguish between reasons and mental causes. That is, she acknowledged that there are mental causes but denied that the reasons for which we act are among them. For example, if you march up and down as a result of being excited on hearing martial music, or jump when frightened by seeing a face in a window, your actions of marching and jumping were caused by your hearing the music and your seeing the face respectively; and these are mental causes. But if you had

3. D. Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963), pp. 685–699.
4. A notable exception was G.H. von Wright, who in his *Norm and Action* (Routledge, 1963) and *Understanding and Explanation* (Routledge, 1971) developed a picture of agency, including actions, omissions and reason explanations, influenced by Wittgenstein, which differed from Davidson's in almost every respect. For recent discussions of von Wright's work, see *Actions, Norms, Values: Discussions with Georg Henrik von Wright*, G. Meggle (ed.), (Walter de Gruyter, 1998). Other important contributions inspired by Wittgenstein were Anthony Kenny's *Action, Emotion and Will* (Routledge, 1963) and *Will, Freedom and Power* (Blackwell, 1975).

jumped because you wanted to reach a book on a shelf and thought that you might do so by jumping, it would be a mistake, she argued, to think of that reason as the cause of your action. In 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', however, Davidson argued that, on this point, the Wittgensteinians had overstated their case; that reasons for action are mental causes; that reason explanations are a species of causal explanation; and, indeed, that this was not only Aristotle's but also the common-sense, pre-philosophical view. In fact, although he had been much influenced by Anscombe, the central claim of Davidson's paper was a doctrine she had explicitly rejected, namely, that when an agent acts for a reason, his reason causes his action and that the 'because' of reason explanations of actions is a causal 'because'.

Davidson's Causal Theory of Action was widely accepted even though it faced a number of difficulties—difficulties which, as its defenders acknowledged, had little to do with any anti-causalist qualms inspired by Ryle or Wittgenstein.[5] The two main difficulties identified after Davidson had purportedly given the death-blow to anti-causalism in the theory of action were (i) the so-called problem of deviant causal chains (which Davidson himself first pointed out); and (ii) the problem of the irrelevancy of the mental (which Davidson denied to be a problem). I'll explain each in turn.

Part of Davidson's argument for the causal theory was that the only way to distinguish between acting for a reason and acting in a way that is merely consistent with a reason is by invoking the concept of causation. According to Davidson, what distinguishes the two kinds of case is that only in the former the reason *causes* the action. However, as Davidson himself realised, invoking causation may be necessary but it is certainly not sufficient to provide an account of what it is for an agent to act for a reason. For an action might be caused by a reason that rationalises it, in the sense specified above, without its being true that the agent acted *for* that reason. The reason, it turned out, must not only cause the action: it must cause it *in the right way*.

The second difficulty for the causal theory is that it appears to generate a dilemma: it either makes actions causally over-determined or it makes the mental irrelevant, or 'epiphenomenal'. According to the standard causal theory, actions are events caused by reasons, which are mental events (or states). But actions, which are typically conceived of as physiological events, are, we know, caused by other physiological and neural events. It follows that either reasons are identical to those neuro-physiological events that cause actions—in which case the status of reason-giving explanations seems compromised (*mental* causation seems superfluous); or they are not identical to those neuro-physiological events – in which case it follows that every action is causally overdetermined. Most contemporary philosophers reject the possibility of 'massive causal overdetermination'. As a result, the capacity of reasons to explain actions is thrown into doubt. This conclusion has been expressed differently by different authors: as the claim that reason explanations have only pragmatic value, that the mental is causally irrelevant, or epiphenomenal,

5. Qualms that have continued to inspire anti-causalists. See, e.g., J. Haldane, 'Some Metaphysical Presuppositions of Agency' *Heythrop Journal*, 35 *(*1994), pp. 296–303; B. Rundle, *Mind in Action*, (Oxford University Press, 1997); D. Hutto, 'A Cause for Concern: Reasons, Causes and Explanations', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59 (1999), pp. 381–401; F. Stoutland, 'Intentionalists and Davidson on Rational Explanation', in *Actions, Norms and Values: Discussions with Georg Henrik von Wright*. I don't mean to imply that the anti-causalist arguments advanced in these works are the same as those that Davidson had addressed in his 1963 paper.

that mental properties have no causal role, or are inert, etc. In short, as the somewhat tired slogan goes, the conclusion seems to be that 'mind does not matter'.[6]

Subsequent attempts to 'make mind matter' (in both senses of the expression) were therefore construed as attempts to explain how the mental properties or features of certain neuro-physiological events and states could be shown to have causal efficacy and hence explanatory import. This problem help generate an intense dispute over a related but separate question, namely, the question of whether the content of mental states is 'broad' or 'narrow' (i.e. whether, or to what extent, the constitution of an agent's environment determines what his mental states, such as his beliefs and wants, are about), as held by externalists and internalists in the philosophy of mind respectively. So, although the problem of mental causation arose within the context of the philosophy of action, it quickly became a general problem in the philosophy of mind.

A number of philosophers have argued that the problem of mental causation arises only when the doctrine that reason explanations are causal is combined with independent theoretical commitments, in particular a commitment to certain versions of physicalism which involve what might be called a 'naturalising ambition' that seeks to reduce, in one way or another, mental causation and explanation to physical causation and explanation; or, in a different idiom, the personal to the impersonal point of view.[7]

Recently, some of the debates that dominated earlier work in the theory of action (such as the individuation of action) have subsided. Others (for example the problem of mental causation) have continued, but their scope has widened beyond the confines of the theory of action. In the meantime, other topics have grabbed the limelight in the literature. One common feature of more recent debates is that they tend to concern questions at the intersection of the philosophy of action and ethics, or more generally, issues of normativity. In what follows, I shall outline the shape of the debates over three issues that have attracted a good deal of attention in recent work in this field. Each of these issues falls roughly under each of the main headings outlined in the introduction. They are: omissions; the nature of motivating reasons and their relation to normative reasons in action; and the role of the agent in the production and explanation of actions.

6. Some of the seminal papers in this debate were collected in J. Heil and A. Mele (eds.), *Mental Causation* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

7. Among these philosophers, a minority have embraced a form of non-Cartesian dualism. For example, Jonathan Lowe, in his *Subjects of Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), defends a form of dualism of self and body that attributes causal powers to mental states and which, he claims, is nonetheless a thoroughly naturalistic position. In *Causing Actions*, (Oxford University Press, 2000) Paul Pietroski defends what he calls a non-Cartesian form of dualism, although he accepts the supervenience of the mental on the physical. Others prefer a different approach; for example, in her 1993 paper 'Causation and Explanation' *Mental Causation*, pp. 161–188, Jennifer Hornsby distinguished the claim that reason explanations are causal from the view that reasons are *causes*, arguing that Davidson's causalist arguments support only the former. The paper is reprinted in her 1998 collection of essays *Simple Mindedness* where she defends a non-dualist explanation of 'the mind's place in the world' within a position she calls 'naive naturalism'. In a similar spirit, Tyler Burge in 'Mind-Body Causation and Explanation' (in *Mental Causation*, pp. 97–120) says that "mentalistic explanation and mental causation do not need validation from materialist metaphysics" (p. 17).

III

The debate about the nature of actions, which saw a flurry of papers in the 70s and 80s, continued in a more muted tone in the past fifteen years, though fewer authors concerned themselves with the individuation and location of actions, and many more wondered more generally whether actions are best conceived of according to the prevailing doctrine.[8] But as the debate over the metaphysics of actions waned, that over the metaphysics of *omissions* waxed. Previous accounts of action inspired by Davidson, when they dealt with omissions at all, dealt with them mostly as an afterthought.[9] But omissions are part of the behaviour of agents to which Anscombe's question, properly modified, can be given application, for sometimes agents omit to do things *intentionally* and *for a reason*. Moreover, omissions, and their outcomes, are certainly the subject matter for questions about causal and moral responsibility. And the questions of what an omission is and what distinguishes intentional and non-intentional omissions, as well as being interesting in their own right, are potentially illuminating for the corresponding questions about actions. Omissions, then, fall squarely within the range of behaviour that is the province of the philosophy of action.

Some philosophers write as if any example of an agent's not doing something is an omission but it is clear that Anscombe's question 'Why?' cannot be given proper application to all not-doings. Following Bernard Williams we might characterise an omission as an agent's not doing something that there was a 'normative expectation' for him to do;[10] where a normative expectation arises from factors such as the agent's identity, circumstances, role, freely entered commitments, etc., and has the force of an 'ought'. This gives omissions a normative (but not necessarily moral) dimension.

As well as the general question of what counts as an omission, philosophers have disagreed about the question of whether, given their 'negative' character, omissions can be said to cause anything, and have also reflected on whether there is any morally significant difference between

8. Thus, some philosophers have argued that actions are not motions of the body but their causes, or events of some kind suitably related to those movements. One view, which had been defended by O'Shaughnessy in the 70s and Hornsby in the 80s and recently, is that actions are tryings; see her 'Dualism in Action', in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Current Issues in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); see also T. Cleveland, *Trying Without Willing: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, (Ashgate, 1997). A different view, related to the concept of agent causation, is defended by those who have found inspiration in the views of Thomas Reid; see, for example, T. O'Connor's 'Agent Causation', in his *Agents, Causes and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 173–200, and his *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and W. Rowe, 'The Metaphysics of Freedom: Reid's Theory of Agent Causation', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 74 (2000), pp. 425–446. Others have questioned whether the idiom of events best captures the nature of actions; see, J. Bennett, *The Act Itself* (Oxford University Press, 1995) and M. Alvarez and J. Hyman, 'Agents and their Actions', *Philosophy*, 73 (1998), pp. 219–245, who claim, following von Wright, that actions are causings of events by agents, but are not themselves events.
9. Davidson famously said that, in his claim that all actions are bodily movements, the phrase 'bodily movement' should be interpreted generously enough to include non-movements.
10. B. Williams, 'Acts and Omissions, Doing and not Doing', in his *Making Sense of Humanity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 349–360.

actions and omissions, or between making something happen and allowing it to happen.[11] One issue that thinking about omissions raises with special urgency is that of the relation between causal and moral responsibility. When one thinks of 'positive' actions, it seems reasonable to say that, for someone to be held morally responsible for an event, they must have contributed, however indirectly, to the causing of that event. But this is not so clear when we turn to omissions. For it is arguable that an agent might be held to be morally responsible for an event that he did not contribute to causing—in the sense that it is not possible to trace a causal chain going from the event to something the agent did—*if* the agent failed to prevent the event *through an omission*. In other words, it seems that merely allowing an event to happen could, when certain conditions obtain, suffice to attribute some moral responsibility for that event to the agent that allows it to happen. (The classic example is that of allowing a child to drown when one (knew that one) could have saved her without endangering one's life, even when one had no causal responsibility for her present predicament.)

Philosophers have disagreed about what we should conclude from this. Some see this as proof that causal responsibility is not a condition for moral responsibility (this view may be strengthened by the conviction that omissions, being 'negative' events, can not be causes).[12] Some, who think that moral responsibility requires causal responsibility, argue that the mere fact that the agent *could have* prevented an event (subject to certain conditions concerning awareness, etc.) makes him causally, and hence morally, responsible for it. A more moderate position argues that an omission may sometimes be said to contribute to the causing of an event on the grounds that (i) the occurrence of the event is counterfactually dependent on the omission, and (ii) the omission is sufficiently 'salient' to contribute to explain the occurrence of the event.[13] It has been maintained that this does not show that omissions (and absences in general) are *causes* but merely that they figure in causal explanations, for instance, as salient features of the background conditions or situation. I cannot go into this issue here. But whatever one says about the general question of 'causation by absence', it seems there is something distinctive about the causal relevance of *omissions* compared to that of other lacks and absences, and it is this: the causal relevance of an omission is generally a direct result of normative considerations. That is, an omission's salience in the causal explanation of an event is typically directly proportional to the strictness of the normative expectation that the agent would prevent that event (or do what might have prevented the event). And this, in turn, suggests that in the case of some omissions, the causal-moral dependence typical of actions is reversed: the inclination to attribute causal

11. A topic famously debated by Anscombe and Jonathan Bennett in *Analysis* in 1965, and subsequently discussed by Philippa Foot and Warren Quinn among others. For a recent discussion, see S.C. Rickless, 'The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing', *Philosophical Review*, 106, (1997), pp. 555–575.
12. Of course, the problem of causation arises not only for omissions but also generally for lacks and absences, and there is a substantial literature on that issue under the topic of causation. For opposed views on whether absences can cause anything see D. Lewis 'Void and Object', (who believes they can) and H. Beebee, 'Causing and Nothingness', both in J. Collins, N. Hall, L.A. Paul, (eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals* (MIT Press, 2004).
13. For different views on how, i.e., in what sense, omissions can cause anything see: B. Williams, 'Acts and Omissions, Doing and not Doing'; P. Dowe, 'A Counterfactual Theory of Prevention and Causation by Omission', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (2001), pp. 216–226; M. Alvarez, 'Letting Happen, Omissions and Causation', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 61 (2001), pp. 63–81; J.J. Thomson, 'Causation: Omissions' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (2003), pp. 81–103.

responsibility for an event depends, partly, on whether the agent is thought to be morally responsible for the event—a claim most plausibly made in examples of negligence of professional duty or of duties of care.[14]

Another issue where reflection on omissions has been said to undermine accepted views about actions concerns the question of free will and moral responsibility. In a paper published in 1969, Harry Frankfurt initiated a debate about the relation between moral responsibility and the possibility to do otherwise (what became known as the 'Principle of Alternative Possibilities').[15] In that paper Frankfurt argued against the view that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. Some philosophers responded that, even if the requirement does not apply to actions, it does apply to omissions and that this shows that there is a moral asymmetry between actions and omissions. The debate continued through the 1990s.[16] Since this issue is more directly related to the notion of agential control, I shall examine it in the following section. Before turning to that topic, however, I should like to conclude with a few remarks about the significance of omissions for the theory of action.

The above discussion of omissions says little about intentions and reasons but it is clear that, sometimes, an agent may intentionally omit to do something for a reason. There is, then, further work to be done on omissions, in particular, in understanding the relation between an agent's reason for omitting to do something and his omission. And part of that work, no doubt, will involve exploring the extent to which the resources of the causal theory of action can be deployed in understanding the relation between an agent's reasons and his omissions.

IV

The causal theory of action, though still undoubtedly dominant, has been challenged more or less explicitly by a number of philosophers.[17] Some have objected to the idea that reasons for action

14. The question of causation by omission has been hotly debated by moral and legal philosophers, particularly in relation to whether so-called 'Bad Samaritans' cause harm. If one examines the debate, however, it becomes clear that the question about the moral responsibility of Bad Samaritans must be settled before settling the question of whether Bad Samaritans *cause* harm, and not *vice versa*, contrary to what many of the arguments advanced in this dispute imply. For philosophical discussions of omissions in a legal context see: A.P. Simester, 'Why Omissions are Special' *Legal Theory*, 1 (1995), pp. 311–335; C.T. Sistare, 'In the Land of Omissions', *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 14 (1995), pp. 26–48; and P. Smith, 'Bad Samaritans, Acts and Omissions' in *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, R.G. Frey (ed.), (Blackwell, 2003).
15. H. Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), pp. 829–839.
16. For a defence of the asymmetry see J. M. Fischer and M. Ravizza, 'Responsibility and Inevitability', *Ethics*, 101 (1994), pp. 258–278. Randolph Clarke argues against the view that there is such an asymmetry in 'Ability and Responsibility for Omissions', *Philosophical Studies* 73, (1994), pp. 195–208, as does Harry Frankfurt in 'An Alleged Asymmetry between Actions and Omissions', *Ethics*, 104, (1994), pp. 620–623.
17. As well as those mentioned above, some authors have argued for the view that the teleological character of reason explanations excludes the possibility of their being also causal. See G.F. Schueler's *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*, (MIT Press, 1995), and *Reasons and Purposes: Human Rationality and the Teleological Explanation of Action*, (Oxford University Press, 2003). Scott Sehon has published a number of papers devoted to defending this view: 'Teleology and the Nature of Mental States', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1994), pp. 63–72; 'Deviant Causal Chains and the Irreducibility of Teleological Explanation', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 78 (1997), pp. 195–213; 'An Argument against the

are the right kind of thing to be mental causes—I return to this problem in section V. But one of the most salient issues discussed in relation to the standard causal theory of action is the question of whether it ultimately leaves the agent 'out of the picture'. The causal theory, the worry goes, makes the agent appear, at most, as the locus in which the events (or states) that constitute his reasons and actions take place; so, on this picture, the agent seems to be passive. This objection, if right, is worrying because, after all, the causal theory was meant as an account of what it is for someone to *act* for a reason. Many have thought that, unless it can find a more prominent role for the agent, the causal theory fails to show the basis on which agents could be thought to act freely or be morally responsible for their actions.

Some have thought this objection a good reason to revisit the concept of agent-causation, that is, the view that there is an irreducible relation between an agent and her actions.[18] But most contemporary philosophers tend to be highly suspicious of the concept of agent-causation, as they think it is conceptually suspect or in any case superfluous—because, they claim, agent-causation is reducible to event-causation.[19] Among these, many have tried to show how the causal theory *can* accord the agent the required prominence, a task in which they have often been inspired by an idea originating in Harry Frankfurt, namely that what characterises agents (or persons) is their capacity for second-order mental states.[20] Frankfurt then developed an account of agency in terms of 'identification': an action is properly an agent's if the latter *identifies* with the 'springs of his action'. Since then, many philosophers have developed 'hierarchical' accounts of agency incorporating this idea.[21] But it is important to note that the focus of such accounts is

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Causal Theory of Action', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60 (2000), pp. 67–85. See also C. Ginet 'Reasons and Explanations of Action: Causalists versus Non-causalists Accounts' in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. R. Kane (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 386–405.

18. It should be noted, however, that unlike Roderick Chisholm and Richard Taylor who were traditionally associated with the concept of agent-causation, not all these philosophers think that that relation between agent and action is causal. See W. Rowe, 'The Metaphysics of Freedom'; T. O'Connor, 'Agent Causation', and 'Thomas Reid on Free Agency', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 32 (1994), pp. 605–622; R. Harré 'Active Powers and Powerful Actors', *Philosophy*, 48 (Supplementary Volume) (2001), pp. 91–109; S.E. Cuypers, 'Robust Activity, Event-Causation, and Agent-Causation' in J. Bransen, and S.E. Cuypers (eds.), *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* (Kluwer, 1998); and Alvarez and Hyman, 'Agents and their Actions', who argue that agents cause the results of their actions but not their actions.
19. These philosophers tend to endorse the view that causation is always a relation between events or states and, since agents are neither, they cannot, strictly speaking, be causes. Among the few philosophers who have actually discussed in detail the coherence or relevance of the concept of agent causation are: J. Bishop, 'Prospects for Naturalist Libertarianism: O'Connor's *Persons and Causes*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66 (2003), pp. 228–243; N. Hendrikson, 'Against an Agent-Causal Theory of Action', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 40, (2002), pp. 41–58; and E.J. Lowe, 'Event Causation and Agent Causation', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 61 (2001), pp. 1–20.
20. H. Frankfurt, 'Freedom of Will and the Concept of a Person' *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), pp.5–20. Frankfurt developed this idea in subsequent papers, most of them reprinted in his *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). The abundance of literature on Frankfurt's work reflects his great influence. An important recent collection is S. Buss and L. Overtone (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (MIT, 2002), with essays on this theme by Richard Moran, David Velleman, Gary Watson, Michael Bratman, Tim Scanlon, etc. as well as responses by Frankfurt.
21. 'Hierarchical' because they involve variants of the notion of identification with so-called first-order attitudes (mostly desires or 'volitions'). See D. Velleman, 'What Happens When Someone Acts', *Mind* 101 (1992), pp. 461-481, reprinted in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (Oxford University press, 2000). Velleman's account reduces agent-causation to event causation by making the agent 'functionally identical' to 'the desire

often a concern with free will and moral responsibility; that is, with specifying the conditions under which an agent can be said to have performed a free action, an action for which he can be held to be morally responsible.

The causal theory, then, seems to aggravate the alleged incompatibility between freedom (and moral responsibility) and determinism. For if, as the prevalent version of the theory holds, actions are caused by reasons (or intentions) and causation is a law-like relation between events, there appears to be no room for the agent to exercise free choice. In other words, if causes necessitate their effects and if reasons are causes, then reasons necessitate their effects, namely actions. But then agents cannot be said to be free unless they have *some* control over the occurrence of those events (and obtaining of those states) that constitute their reasons; if agents lack such control, then it is not clear, some argue, that they can ever be free or be held to be morally responsible for their actions.

This debate cannot be said to be new. However, the abundant recent literature on the topic has a distinctive flavour because of the prominence it gives to the concepts of control and autonomy.[22] As well as the familiar camps in which philosophers have traditionally set their tents (incompatibilist, compatibilist, libertarian, and determinist) a new divide has been introduced into the debate: that between 'historicists' and 'ahistoricists' (also called 'externalists' and 'internalists'). This divide represents a disagreement about the importance of the aetiology (or 'causal history') of an agent's attitudes and actions. For the ahistoricists (of whom Frankfurt can be thought of as the standard-bearer) what matters for free will and responsibility is whether an agent 'identifies' with the desires that bring about the action. Their opponents claim that the question of how an agent came to have the desires she has, and in particular how much control she had over this, as well as over the causation of her action, must be relevant to issues of moral responsibility.[23] Because of the variety and complexity of the issues involved, and because of the sheer volume of literature, anything like a proper review of recent debates about free will and autonomy is simply beyond the scope of this kind of survey. [24] I shall finish this section by highlighting two features that distinguish it from earlier debates.

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to act in accordance with reasons'. Michael Bratman has recently further developed his 'planning theory of intention' (for which see his *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)) by reference to concepts such as 'higher-order policies', a concept clearly (and avowedly) influenced by Frankfurt's work; see, for example his 'Two Problems About Human Agency', *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society*, 101 (2001), pp. 309–326 and 'Autonomy and Hierarchy' *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 20 (2003), pp. 156–176. For a related but distinctive account of free action see T. Pink, *The Psychology of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

22. Recent contributions that have been particularly influential in this debate are: J.M. Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Blackwell, 1994); A.R. Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy*, (Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Motivation and Agency* (Oxford Univerity Press, 2003) which deals with the relation between motivation, control and agency; R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and J.M. Fischer and M. Ravizza *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility,* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); a symposium on this book, with contributions from Michael Bratman, Alfred Mele and Eleonore Stump, was published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 61 (2000).
23. Fischer and Ravizza (in *Responsibility and Control*) are prominent defenders of this view. The issue is discussed in the essays by Fischer and Stump and in Frankfurt's replies in *Contours of Agency*.
24. Two substantial collections of essays on this topic, with essays by some of the most influential contributors to this debate, have been published recently: R. Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford

One is that, as mentioned, the debate has been much influenced by Frankfurt's challenge to the view that moral responsibility requires 'alternative possibilities'.[25] There is, however, a fundamental question mark over the cogency of much of this debate. Much ink has been spent on whether Frankfurt's challenge succeeds, in particular whether the kind of example he introduced meets two conditions required for the challenge to succeed, namely (i) that the agent *is* morally responsible for the outcome; and (ii) that the agent *could not* have done otherwise. Contributors to this discussion often rely on 'thought-experiments' involving the idea of someone's being *caused to decide* to do something (or caused to do it) through the causing of events in their brains (whether by another agent or by something else). It is not, however, clear that the notion of someone's being caused to *decide* in this way is coherent: why call what results from such brain manipulation *a decision*, or the subsequent bodily movements *an action*?[26] Until this issue is settled, it is impossible to assess arguments that make free use of such thought experiments.

The other, more positive feature of the current debate on free will, is that it is often informed by the insight that free action must be, in some substantial sense, action that comes about as a result of the agent's *responsiveness* to reasons. This brings me to the final section of this paper.

V

One distinctive development in the theory of action has been stimulated by work in the area of practical reason and normativity, and has resulted in a re-examination of the nature of reasons for action. I conclude this paper with some remarks about that development.

Since the 1960s, most philosophers working in the theory of action assume that the reason why someone acts, what is often called their 'motivating' (or 'explanatory') reason, should be understood as consisting of a belief and a desire. Beliefs and desires, in turn, are usually thought of as 'propositional attitudes': mental states of agents that consist in their taking certain attitudes to propositions (or to otherwise characterised 'contents'). Thus, a reason is typically construed as a mental state (or a combination or mental states) with a content, with the capacity (perhaps with the help of some triggering event) to cause events (actions, or intentions that in turn cause actions). In recent years, scepticism concerning this conception of reasons for action has grown, fuelled by several concerns.

University Press, 2002), and the second edition of G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2003), which comprises twenty-two essays, many of them new, as well as a new Introduction.

25. See, for example, D. Widerker, 'Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995), pp. 113–18 and 'Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities', *The Philosophical Review*, 104 (1995), pp. 247–261; A. Eshleman, 'Alternate Possibilities and the Free Will Defence', *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997), pp. 267–86; E. Stump, 'Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility: The Flicker of Freedom', *The Journal of Ethics*, 3 (1999), pp. 299–324; P. van Inwagen, 'Moral Responsibility, Determinism, and the Ability to Do Otherwise', *The Journal of Ethics*, 3 (1999), pp. 341–350.
26. For a defence of the examples, see A.R. Mele and D. Robb, 'Rescuing Frankfurt-Style Cases', *Philosophical Review* 107 (1998), pp. 97–112. For a critical view, see J. Cain, 'Frankfurt Style Cases', *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 19 (2003), pp. 221–229.

On the one hand, the question has been raised whether beliefs and desires are best thought of as mental *states*.[27] Doubt has also been thrown on the idea that motivating reasons can be mental entities of any kind (such as beliefs and desires). This doubt has largely arisen from considerations about the nature of normative reasons (the reasons there are for agents to act) and their relation to motivating reasons.

A number of philosophers working on ethics and practical reason have emphasised the importance of the normative aspect of reasons for action.[28] Discussions of normative reasons have been concerned with a range of questions about, among other things, the connection between rationality, desires, value and normativity. Whatever the answer to those questions might be, these debates have led some philosophers to emphasise the 'reality' of normative reasons; that is, it has led them to emphasize that normative reasons are facts or states of affairs, 'ways the world is', such as that someone is ill or that you made a promise. And this conception of normative reasons, in turn, has had an impact on their thinking about motivating reasons.

Thus, a small but growing minority of philosophers have argued that reflection on the relation between normative and motivating reasons suggests that motivating reasons themselves, the reasons why people actually (decide to) act, cannot be mental states, or indeed psychological entities of any type. The reasoning behind this conclusion varies but, whatever their grounds for holding it, these philosophers agree that the reasons that motivate agents are not mental states, but rather aspects of reality.[29] Or, to put the point differently, what motivates an agent is not *that he believed* something but rather *what he believed*. We are motivated, they say, by what we believe, e.g. that your sister is ill, and not by our believing it. And what we believe, i.e. that your sister is ill, is not a mental state. And while, traditionally, this might have been taken to be the result of a confusion between normative and motivating reasons, these philosophers insist that

27. Some philosophers argued, on Wittgensteinian grounds, that beliefs and desires are not genuine mental states; see P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind. An Analytical Commentary on the* Philosophical Investigations, vol. 3 (Blackwell, 1990), pp. 28ff. More recently the view that they are has been attacked by Helen Steward in *The Ontology of Mind: Events Processes and States,* (Oxford University Press, 1997). Through a detailed analysis of the logical features of statements of belief and desires, Steward shows that the contemporary assumption that beliefs and desires can be conceived of as mental states is highly problematic, to say the least.

28. Some of the most influential recent contributions to this aspect of the debate about normative reasons are: C. Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996), and 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason' in G. Cullity and B. Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 215-254; W. Quinn 'Putting Rationality in its Place' in his *Morality and Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 228-255; T. Scanlon *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. Part 1; M. Smith *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994); J. Raz *Engaging Reason: On The Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford University Press, 1999), which builds on his influential *Practical Reason and Norms* (Hutchinson, 1975).

29. Different views about what motivating reasons might be if they are not mental states, embraced on a variety of grounds, as well as arguments addressing the issues I mention below, can be found in J. Dancy *Practical Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2000); R. Stout *Things that Happen Because they Should* (Oxford University Press, 1996); F. Stoutland, 'The Real Reasons' in *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*, and 'Responsive Action and the Belief-Desire Model' *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 61 (2001), pp. 83–106; R. Bittner, *Doing Things for Reasons* (Oxford University Press, 2001). A related idea, articulated in terms of the first-person perspective, is also found in J. Kim, 'Reasons and the First-Person' in *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation*.

this view is not the result of confusion but rather of the realisation that normative and motivating reasons must be closer in character than they have traditionally been supposed to be.

Defenders of the orthodoxy might respond that such considerations *can* be accommodated by the traditional view: we just need to think of motivating reasons as the *contents* of mental states, i.e. the contents of beliefs and desires. Many among the minority reject the claim that this move can accommodate their insights about motivating reasons. But even if it could, this move does not seem to rescue the traditional view that motivating reasons are mental states. For, if motivating reasons are the *contents* of mental states, it seems to follow that motivating reasons are not *mental states*: the content of a mental state is not a mental state.[30]

Thus, considerations about normativity have led some philosophers to question the traditional view of reasons as mental states with causal powers. Perhaps a way of putting the issue is the following. If we think about the connection between reasons and actions while focusing on the explanation of action, the idea that reasons for action are psychological states that play a causal role in the production of action seems appealing, although we're left with the dual-aspect problem of mental causation: the question of whether every action is over-determined and the problem of the 'causal relevance of the mental'. If, on the other hand, we think about the connection between them while focusing on normativity and motivation, the idea that motivating reasons could be mental states loses much of its plausibility though, now, we are left with the need to explain the connection between motivation and psychological explanation. In short, reflection about normative and motivating reasons suggests that we need to think afresh about the connection between deliberation, normativity, motivation and reason explanation.

Conclusion

I said at the beginning of this article that the very idea of a subject called 'the philosophy of action' is rather new, but added that this is not because the problems it deals with are of recent invention. In this survey I have mentioned only some of those problems, and have been able to give no more than an indication of some of the issues which have preoccupied philosophers in this area in the past decade or so. There are some important topics I have not even mentioned, such as the problem of *akrasia*, the role of emotion in human action, the topics of collective or social action, rationality and rational choice, etc.

One distinctive characteristic of the philosophy of action is that it has very vague boundaries, because the questions at the core of its agenda often cannot be answered without delving into other areas of philosophy, such as metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, ethics, and legal philosophy. At different times, different questions have occupied centre-stage in the philosophy of action, and therefore the debates have been more closely tied to this or that area in philosophy. Thus, while debates in the 1970s and 1980s were dominated by issues to do with the metaphysics of events and of causation, and with the philosophy of language and logic, more recent debates have focused on issues more or less directly related to

30. An important and disputed question is what kind of entity a motivating reason is: a fact? A proposition? A state of affairs? An event?

moral philosophy and normativity. What makes this area somewhat unwieldy is also what makes it so exciting: it deals with some of the most important questions that, not just philosophers (indeed all of the great philosophers), but 'ordinary' people have been asking themselves for centuries. And it deals with them in ways that transcend not just the boundaries of its subject matter, but the boundaries of what might be called merely 'academic' pursuits.[31]

[31] I should like to thank Helen Steward, John Hyman and colleagues at Southampton for comments on earlier drafts.